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## THE ÆSTHETIC PRINCIPLE IN COMEDY<sup>1</sup>

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Although it is fashionable nowadays to praise the 'sense of humor,' there is a traditional rôle for critics of art which consists in deploring and cavilling at the human love of laughter. To pursue the laughable is almost invariably, according to this tradition, to sacrifice the high for the low, the excellent for the perverse. Supremacy, in art as in all walks of life, is taken to be isolated and sorrowful; beauty's majesty must wear the buskin. The marriage of æsthetic excellence with tragedy is indeed not only a legend of the elect, it is a commonplace of popular culture. The acclaimed art of our human inheritance has the power to awaken sadness; the acclaimed masters are masters of the mournful note,—Æschylus, Euripides, Michael Angelo, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, and who else you will,—their best is their most funereal. Nevertheless increase in humane quality may be fairly gauged by gain in the scope of laughter. While it is untrue that savages are without a sense of humor, it is true that their derision has a narrow range and fixes itself upon the more fleshly if profounder aspects of the common lot,—upon the pursuit and capture of food, upon the business of marriage and child-bearing, upon the enhancement and glory of the self. These great central interests are, no doubt, the piteous matter of amusement for civilization also, and our populace has hardly attained a wide vision of the comedy in the residual world; but it nevertheless has such a vision, and is appreciative of

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<sup>1</sup>This paper is part of the third chapter in a book—"Beauty and Use: Outlines of a Pragmatic Philosophy of Art"—now in preparation.

the range of the comic through institutions and ideas, through the sacred and the lofty, as well as through the natural and the instinctive. Civilized mankind has gained on the unsophisticated in so far as it can laugh and command where the savage trembles and is afraid, while the greatest master of life seems to be he who, like Democritus, understanding the world's nature, laughs at its manners.

A profound and vital reason exists for this human love of the comic, for this increasing power to find and to place it, for the fact that the majority pursue it, if not more eagerly, as eagerly as they pursue beauty; for the fact that the cult of the 'sense of humor' has perhaps more shrines and a greater body of worshippers than the institutional cult of beauty. The love of beauty is the love of happiness; its possession in the æsthetic experience is the joy of successful self-conservation. Beauty is the directly-felt goodness of the environment. The environment arrests you as you plod or scurry in your daily routine; it holds you, brings all the faculties of your organic self to play upon it instantaneously, integrates them, sums them, until you attain whatever enduring optimum of value the environment offers. Beauty is this optimum of value, this realized entelechy of harmonious and instant interplay in adaptation of your whole self with that particular environment. Now the behavior of the comic is much the same. It, too, comes upon you suddenly during the affair of living; it, too, arrests and deploys your life, compelling it to take hold of the comic essence it offers you, and to it also you are adapted in the instant, harmoniously, completely, directly. On the other hand, there are certain well-marked differences between the experience of the comic and the experience of the beautiful. The former seems more complex, both with regard to your own state and the condition of the object. Their elements are harder to grasp and more difficult to hold. For yourself,—you smile, at the very least; ordinarily, you laugh. For the object, there is something that corresponds to your own condition,—an uncertainty, a movement, in character and in form.

Consider these differences more closely, of course only so far as they are ordinary, healthy and normal; the transnormal marvels of laughter are not our affair. In your own attitude the most striking point is the fact that it is an *action*; this smiling and laughing is something *doing*, and it is a doing which you love, which you prefer and persist in. To laugh is a privilege and a delight; and to be laughed at is, significantly, a degradation and a pain. It is not so with beauty; to be beautiful is even more agreeable than to enjoy beauty. This irreversible direction of laughter, well-exemplified in its

contagion, becomes still more significant when we observe its details. There is first the smile; the corners of the upper lip are drawn up, the canines and the incisors, the renders and the cutters, are laid bare, wrinkles form under the eyes, which narrow and brighten; there is a slight heightening of the respiration. There is also, perhaps, a barely perceptible outward movement of the hands. Very little is needed to pass from this smile, which may of course be reduced to mere upward twitch of the lips or a mere wrinkling of the eyes, to the quiet, audible laugh,—just a deep, not frequently noticed inspiration, then expiration in short, quick puffs, or chuckles or gurgles, accompanied by more noticeable wider expansive movements of hands and legs. If the laughter grows farther, is less restrained, then the head is thrown back as when swallowing a very agreeable morsel, the alternating inspiratory and expiratory processes grow more and more obvious and prolonged, the explosion of sounds louder, of varying pitch; the eyes are narrowed to a frown, tears come, the limbs are thrown far out, or the body sways back and forth rhythmically, in wider and wider arcs, the hands are extended and slapped together. If the occasion or witness of the laughter is a person, he may be slapped on the back, poked in the ribs, or even embraced. Withal the blood-vessels are dilated, the blood comes faster through the system, more oxygen reaches it. In a word, the general vitality is heightened, the basis of being extended. The whole phenomenon of laughter seems expansive, enlarging, vitalizing; all its movements appear as if intended to embrace and absorb their occasion.

And that occasion,—supplied by nature, created and modified by art? However it occurs, it must be given whole before it can evoke its laughing response. The maker of an unpremeditated joke does not laugh when he makes it, he cannot; he laughs like his auditors, after he has heard it, after he has taken in the comic substance for what it is. And the apparently frequent anticipatory laughter of the auditor, that is in no sense directed upon what is not yet but will be; it is directed upon a content already offered and found comic. The essential condition of laughter,—paradoxical, commonplace as it may be,—is the actual apprehension of the concretely present laughable.

This, both in nature and in art, has many forms, widely diverse, disparate and difficult of comprehension under a single rubric. In nature there is earliest of all, the eleemosynary 'laugh' of the well-fed, replete, resting child repeating in its contentment the pleasurable movements of sucking, so much like laughter, so essentially a smile. The object which especially evokes it is said to be the rise of the food in the gullet,

so that the action would be like chewing a vicarious cud. But this is the mere beginning of laughter, and its occasion is problematic. A far more certain occasion is tickling. Now tickling seems to be a pleasure both sought and dreaded. The child's responsive actions to the tickling stimulus are partly defensive, opposing, mainly expansive and embracing. It seems to contain two elements uncertainly mixed, alternating, undirected, carrying both menace and safety, with the element of safety predominating. Under favorable conditions the whole or any portion of the body responds to it. An expected contact of an unknown and thus far discomforting stimulus turns out to be a contact of pleasure and delight. There is an essential conflict and titillation between two diverse elements of which the personality-feeling, whatever that be, finally finds itself free and master.

The daily life offers many instances which are determinable as complications of the characteristic contents of tickling. The laughter which follows fear, emotional or intellectual tension, is such. So when a child laughs after having been frightened by a dog, a woman after having heard bad news or on the shock of some vision or encounter, the terrifying object has seized on the mind, disorganized it, upset its equilibrium, emotionally or otherwise, is a menace to its proper character. When for whatever reason, it lapses, when this process dies down, when the organism has, with temporary or permanent success, resisted and vanquished its enemy, the engaged energies are released, the disturbed equilibrium is restored, the organism is again in possession of itself, and in a single instant or a longer period, it does not matter, apprehends the whole of the lapsed situation with the failure of its enemy and laughs, spontaneously, instinctively. Literature affords many instances of the same thing,—the typical laughter of mad Ophelia, Hamlet's curious ironical play with the ghost:

"Well said, old mole. Canst work i' the ground so fast?  
A worthy pioneer"

are instances. The preceding experience seems, so to speak, to break off and to constitute an object in which an element formerly a menace or a terror, exalted above the protagonist, has been thrown in the dust and made of low degree.

The laughter of sheer health might seem to be almost antithetical to this,—frequent, free, easy, evoked by the most trifling instances,—the sight of food, of friends, of strangers, the most ordinary events and actions. But it is not intrinsically different. Joyous though this laughter is, it is most prone to break out upon sudden stimuli, the overflowing energy of health seizes its unsuspecting object, is master of it *ab initio*,

and perverts its natural and proper relations to the world in which it belongs. The apparently meaningless laughter of sturdy children is such an action, the laughter of savages who are sufficiently familiar with strangers no longer to fear them, the very confident laughter of crowds, the careless laughter of people in power. Health, which is self-assured, stable, optimistic, finds everything grist for its mill of laughter, that is in the least different from it,—that is less stable than it. Health is literally wholeness, a self-sufficiency and completeness. The laughable, in so far as it is like tickling, is conversely not sufficient in itself, nor complete nor balanced nor stable. It seems less than health, and at its mercy.

This is perhaps nowhere so apparent as in play and make-believe. Those who have watched children at it must remember pleasantly how, wherever this play is collective, it is punctuated by continual bursts of laughter, sometimes accompanied by screams of it. Those who have questioned children about the persons and objects of their simulation, the characters they and their playthings assume, will not fail to recognize how deep a sense of the stability and reality of their customary environment children really have, and how rare are illusions on their part concerning the status of their fictions. For most of them, even the youngest, there is nothing magical or strange even in the most mechanical toys. Their sense of mechanism, indeed, seems stronger than their sense of mystery, of personality, of faerie. They do with their make-believes what suits their convenience; and what essentially suits their convenience is the domination and supremacy of the person they are. If they "play school" they insist either on being teacher, or on being victoriously troublesome pupils; if they personate characters, they insist on being the gloating all-vanquishing champion; Tom Sawyer as bold Robin Hood must kill the sheriff of Nottingham, but then Bill Harper, who was the dead sheriff of Nottingham, must also subdue Robin Hood. He cannot endure to be dead, even imaginatively. The laughter of play, then, apart from the physiological elements which like tickling depend upon titillation of expectancies, of physical contacts aimed and missed, of purposes crossed and frustrated, is a laughter directed upon an immediately apprehended difference between fiction and reality; and is the sense of vital power of control over both. In that more malicious form of play known as teasing, this becomes still more evident,—for teasing is play on the edge of earnest, pleasure on the edge of pain. Both the teaser and the teased laugh,—the teaser because he sees the contrast between the expectations of his victim and the character of his own intentions, because in that respect his

victim is at his mercy; the teased, because he recognizes the deceitful nature of his ostensible danger, because in his alarm at its on-coming he can still take it for what it is and so cause it to fall short of its intent. If he succeeds in doing so utterly, he turns the tables on his persecutor who thereby himself becomes the victim; if he fails in doing so, he becomes angered and the situation turns from fun to gravity. And with what ease, so often! A wink, a look, a word, may serve to turn a play of wit into a quarrel, a friendly game at cross purposes into a struggle for life.

Laughter, indeed, is intimately and often the clearest expression of victory in such vital struggles. The shouting laughter of partisans at great spectacular games in which their sides are successful, the wide, expansive, absorbing movements of throwing arms and limbs far out into the air, swinging hats and dancing attest this relation. It is evinced in the traditional report of the successful prize-fighter who toward the end of his combat 'comes up smiling.' Usage indicates it in 'the self-confident smile' attributed to any one who is master of an art or of a situation. Popular wisdom expresses it in the proverb 'He laughs best who laughs last.' Victory in combat of any sort whatsoever may be accompanied by laughter,—when the tension of the combat is relaxed, when the mind erects itself and surveys the event and the prostrate enemy. The laughter does not occur during the battle; during the battle there is silence, grim absorption in the business at hand. The occasion of laughter is not the combat, but the fallen in combat, the vanquished enemy, the mighty laid low, the peer reduced, the apparent strength unmasked and laid bare for the weakness it really is, while the victor remains firm, unshaken and laughing in his might.

The denudation or exposure of things, the inversion of appearance by reality before a witness whose own 'reality' remains firm, whose seeming and being are by contrast one, is indeed the basis, together with this envisagement of the defeated enemy, of the most universal matter of laughter nature supplies,—the laughter of sex. Fully nine-tenths of the witticisms of daily life, and more than half the wit of literature plays on sex. Sex is laughable because social life requires that it be hidden, set aside, submerged; while the natural endowment of man impels the instinct to raise its head out of the darkness, to peer into the light of day. This traditional throwing-off of linguistic, sartorial or customary convention causes laughter. The peasant and the boor, by use of language, do so directly,—the mere mention of matters allied to the reproductive function brings laughter; the more-trained, self-controlled, sophisticated individual is indirect.

He proceeds by innuendo, ambiguities, covert references. The submerged intent has farther to travel, more inhibitions to vanquish, in order to reach the open field of consciousness. But all classes of society laugh at suddenly discovered lovers, at amatory irregularities, directly and without thought. When they take thought they condemn them; and often, even in condemning, laugh.

Something like denudation or exposure is involved in the laughable character of novelties. The comedy of newness is almost universal. Even if the newness is circular and seasonal, it is still funny,—so the 'first straw hat' is every season an object of derision; a boy's first 'long trousers,' or first dress-coat. Savages are said to laugh continually at their first white visitor and his appurtenances; children and even adults will tease and persecute people with an unaccustomed beard, a different cut of clothes, another accent. The new is new just because it is distinctive, different, a variation from the habitual and customary. It is a little thing, isolate, against a massive tradition, a universal manner, a cumulative habit. It is a deviation from the type, a deformity like the traditionally laughable hunch-back, club-foot, magnified nose or hare-lip. At the moment of its appearance, it is at an evident disadvantage. It is an intruder, without the power to make its intrusion good. It is laughed at. To it may be assimilated the whole assemblage of little drolls which people and diversify the daily life—irruptions of irregularity, violations of the pervasive conventions which constitute the economy of social intercourse,—such are wearing the wrong clothes, using the wrong utensil, petty misfortunes, clumsiness of manner or of speech,—the whole host of disharmonies and incongruities at which we laugh. Of these the essence is the irruption of an unexpected, a new and discordant yet impotent factor into a harmonious and well-balanced situation.

The occasions of laughter, then, as they naturally arise in the events of the daily life are occasions which contain at least two elements, not in harmony with each other. In tickling we have given the dual nature of a stimulus; in terror the sudden fall or breaking-off and lapse of a dominating tension; in pure health, the weakness of other things; in play and teasing and battle and victory, the contrast between make-believe and actuality, apparent strength and real weakness; in sex and novelty, the conflict of the natural flux and the social order. In each case the occasion offers us a contrast or conflict between two elements in which the spectator does not participate. In the course of life they appear impure, adulterate with extraneous elements, not altogether detached from the residual flux. Their arrestive and vitalizing power



is restrained by other and ulterior conditions, by almost equally potent simultaneous impetus from interests looking in other directions, toward other ends. The art of comedy consists in abstracting these essentially comic complexes from their habitations in the flux, in freeing them of extraneities, and throwing them into relief. The comic of art, hence, has a rather different character from the comic of life,—it accumulates a certain desiderative value which is akin to beauty. In art, the comic might, indeed, be called the beauty of disintegration.

Although comedy has chiefly been associated with letters and the stage, there is no telling with what degree of adequacy it might not be expressed in the other arts. A limit is suggested in the fact that movement, action, invariably intensifies comic effect, but the least degree of movement required is perhaps impossible of determination. It is certain, however, that painted and carved objects are more laughable either when they are very simple, or when they occur in a progressive series. They appear either to tell stories, which need to be supplemented by verbal rubrics, or to present very obvious direct contrasts, exaggerations, novelties, whimsicalities, oddities. They involve an essential paradox which is, at one of its extremes, caricature, at another, grotesque symbolism. Animals with human expressions on their features; human beings with bestial characteristics; inanimate objects with some of the attributes of life; living beings with the appurtenances of the non-living; inverted natural proportions; and so on to no end,—these constitute the material of the plastic comic. Sculpture is one of the arts perhaps least amenable to the comic ideal. Most laughable sculpture is caricature, often caricature by accident, not by intention. The material of sculpture, in spite of modern practice and ambition, does not readily lend itself to the representation of that disintegrating essence which is the comic material. It is more adequate to the representation of repose than of action, and the movements it most successfully represents are the integrative and co-operative movements that enhance poise and stability, not those that express inner diversity and disintegration. Grotesque sculpture is not, by nature, comic; for the genuinely grotesque is the harmony of the extraordinary. Comic sculpture, when intentional, is caricature; when unintentional is maladroitness of the sculptor. That it has a larger capacity for comic expression than it has thus far exhibited must nevertheless be admitted. But such larger expression would need to be serial and cumulative, not instantaneous. It would require explanatory legend, and would approximate very closely to the comic of painting. Painting which shall

be intrinsically comic by virtue of its coloring or design is not ordinarily conceived. There is no inherent exclusion of such laughableness; the famous Schopenhauerian example of the comic,—the curve and its tangent,—indicate that in one instance, at any rate, pure geometrical form was apprehended as laughable. There is no reason why minds habituated to the apprehension of forms and colors as such should not discover an infinite deal of the laughable in them. There might be a pure comedy of design and of landscape, as well as of human feature and action. Hogarth, indeed, approximates some such thing in his ludicrous example of the consequences that follow on ignorance of the laws of perspective. But taken as a whole, comic pictures are mainly caricatures; they have a social subject-matter, and are most effective in series. Our 'humorous' literature is full of illustrations of this principle; the daily newspapers teem with them; they are the essence of the "comic supplement." They appear, significantly, to be studies of manners. The rich comedy of such series as Hogarth's 'Hudibras,' 'The Rake's Progress,' 'The Good and the Idle Apprentice' seems to lie in the cumulative integration of cross-intentions with caricature; and it is doubtful whether this integration would be so funny without the attached verbal legends, and the presence of laughing or smiling human faces. The latter constitute a very important element in the comic effect of pictures; and their presence is usually a drawback to the determination of intrinsic comic quality.

The enhancing effect of movement on comic quality indicates clearly why comedy is more frequently a matter for literature and the drama than for the plastic arts. Literature and the drama are intrinsically serial and climactic; while painting and sculpture are simultaneous and sudden. Music, the other temporal art, whose very essence is time, is not so often said to contain or to offer comic content. Nevertheless music has its distinctly comic material and method, and its characteristic comedy. This seems mainly to be provided by a combination of light, staccato instrumentation with deep-pitched notes, by the use of uncompleted phrases, and latterly by imitative natural noises like the crowing of cocks, the cries of children, the whistling of birds,—all in careful 'harmony' with the theme of the composition. That the first two devices are musically amusing may be granted. But whether the comedy of the last device springs from the nature of the art itself or from the more apparent intrusion of a foreign element into the musical complex is an open question, though barely so. But whatever the basis of the laughter, the laughter is indubitable.

In drama and literature, the nature of the mirth-provoking object is less open to question. The material of laughter is here purely human, purely relevant to complex or simple human interests. Indeed, according to one writer the human is the only material that laughter can have. This material may be internal or external; it may offer itself in the individual solely, or in the confrontation of individuals with each other or with their environments. The outer marks of the comic individual may be merely clumsiness or deformity; may be speech incompatible with gesture, gesture with speech, the merest physiological malapropism, the lisp, the stutter, the bare misuse of language. Any one of these may be amusing; all of them taken together constitute the representative comic figure, Mr. Punch. Falstaff is funny by his mere avoirdupois, Bardolph by his flaming nose, Pistol by his rhodomontade. Bring them into action, and these purely external traits may distort purpose, and throw the most excellent intention out of gear. A fat man makes a shadowy trooper; a ranting rascal cannot tell a straight story.

But this derailing of a swift-moving intention need not depend merely upon the external characteristics of the comic protagonist. Loosely interpreted, it is the essence of every comic situation, which is in Aristotle's excellent simile "in the nature of the missing of a mark." The situation is created by the fact that the characters do not hit it off. Its clearest type is perhaps Mr. Pickwick chasing his wind-blown hat. The situation has come upon him suddenly, out of the blue. The orderly march of his life has been broken up. His hat, which properly belongs on his head and should protect him from the wind and weather, has betrayed him to the wind and weather; and to add insult to injury, leads him a sorry dance away from his proper affairs, for the purpose of restoring the disturbed balance without which they do not easily go on. The hat must be back on the man's head before the man can return to his business. This is very laughable; but normally the laughter is killed if the man is compelled to return hatless to the routine of his life. Where hatlessness begins, tragedy begins; and this is a very significant feature in all comedy. The hat may not be utterly lost if the laughter is to be saved.

The hat-hunt runs over us from practically every cranny of the comic scene. Its principle is an inversion of the ordinary,—an inversion shocking, fresh and unexpected. Instead of a trick or perversity of things, it may be an encounter of limps or persons. The runner who trips over his own feet is funny; but the clown whose running is brought to a sudden stop by the identically similar running of an identically

similar clown is funnier. The classic comedy, so well represented by the 'Comedy of Errors,' is based fundamentally upon this sort of inversion,—the kind of inversion that a person undergoes in a mirror. He is there, he is himself; yet he is not there, he is another, opposed and inimical. The alter-ego is the source of the deeds for which the ego suffers or is rewarded. The Syracusan and Ephesian Dromios are so related in practical life that the mere mirrored image of the one, having a different history, different antecedents, and a different status pays for the defects of the other. It is as if the image in the mirror were beaten for the impudence of the grimace it reflected. It is the "sudden glory" of the insignificant, the irruption and domination of the irrational.

Still another variant of it is the direct inversion of catastrophe, as the sudden and unprophesiable ups-and-downs of Face and his crew in the 'Alchemist,' the reversals of Epicoene, the inversions of the 'School for Scandal.' This is so obvious that more than to mention it is superfluous. The persistent repetition of such an inversion, always reconstituting the same situation, is another typical mode of the comic process. The battle between Punch and the devil is its key-form. Punch strikes the devil down with a blow that should deal him his eternal quietus; and the obstinate devil rises unharmed again and again and yet again to return to the attack as horrible as ever. Or perhaps the condition of the protagonist is that of the jumping-jack. Its limbs appear to move so spontaneously, so freely, so irresponsibly, while in reality they obey the inexorable leverage of strings and pulleys. I cannot think of a better instance of this type of inversion than Malvolio, so apparently pursuing his own freely-chosen purpose, so clearly the dupe and the toy of Maria and her fellow-conspirators. The comedies of Ben Jonson are full of such types, from the La Fooles, the Dappers the Druggers, to the Voltores and Moscas and Volpones.

Seek where you will in the comic of the stage or of letters, and invariably you will find something corresponding to one of these forms of inversion. If it is the comedy of mere incident, it will consist of the irruption of the unusual, an upset or reversal, of some sort, in nature essentially a disharmony like that of the man chasing his hat. In the comedy of manners, one finds private habit opposed to public usage, the mode to good sense, the individual preference to the social sanction: the comedy consists of the titillation, the see-sawing of the one with the other. In the comedy of character one finds no less the same thing, with another emphasis. The individual idiosyncrasies which are the deep-sunk well-springs of motive, pressing up action after action, with inexorable con-

sistency, are exhibited in conflict with social norms and conventional preferences. Here we are face to face with the comic object whose ludicrousness is internal first of all. It is the source of all else that is laughable, infecting with its distortions all that it touches. The comic of character is the internal homologue of the comic of person. It is founded on the internal disharmony of traits, on malproportion, moral deformity, as the other is based on physical deformity. The theory of humors, on which Ben Jonson has based all his comic pieces, fantastic and untrue though it be, has nevertheless grasped the secret of ludicrous character. It offers as the standard excellence the nature in which each of the four humors is present in right measure, just sufficiently choleric, phlegmatic, sanguine and melancholic to be of nice balance, poised for any flight you will. But change the proportion of any one of these humors, and you upset this excellent balance, and destroy the fine poise. The greater humor is at war with the others, perverts them to its own uses, interferes in their business, and ultimately breaks up the nature it distorts. The inner disharmony is expressed outwardly in a thousand ways, and this outer expression is comedy of character. Now multiply these humors a thousand fold, consider the relation of any one of the numberless preferences, habits, desires, intellects, tricks of speech, manner and gesture as well as of soul, to the remainder, and you cannot help seeing that this relation is identical with the relation between the weightier humor and the others. It is a combat, a distortion, a disintegrative maladjustment. The consuming passion for silence in Morose, the self-conceit of Malvolio, the didacticising stupidity of Polonius, the avarice of Harpagon, the magniloquent aimlessness of Mr. Micawber, the hypocrisy of Tartuffe, the subtly rigid self-worship of Willoughby Patterne, and I care not what other trait of what other person you will,—each is a trait which is comic only because disproportionate, and hence, wherever it appears, disorganizing. Harpagon loses his wealth because he loves it so; and, by the way, is made altogether ridiculous because his moral deformity intrudes and operates where it should not. Had Shylock loved revenge less, he would have suffered less; and Malvolio, certainly an efficient steward, had nothing but his cancerous self-love to thank for his degradation and misfortune. Hypertrophy of imagination over common sense in the Knight of La Mancha, the atrophy of imagination in Sancho, the fleshly weakness in Falstaff,—such are the fountains of comedy in these heroes of the sock. Whenever any one quality is called into play, this forestalls it, snatches its action from it, or spoils it by its influence. Perhaps all comic traits are no more

than the love of life, the instinct for self-preservation, no more than the spontaneous and natural egoism of mankind, taking a perverted direction, so eager to live well as to belie fantastically the most fundamental conditions as well as the most subtle of right living. The greatest of all ruinous misproportions is, of course, that of self-deception. Invariably by its means diverse social and natural antagonisms are exhibited and made explicit, whether in the adventure on *Gadshill*, the wind-mill tilt, the tantalizing dinner, or the cross-gartering. What "moves men merrily" is the far-spreading infectious disharmony.

This patent malproportion in character which is the prime source of comedy has led to an opinion, variously held, that the comic figure is an abstraction, that he is less individual and more 'universal' than the protagonist of tragedy; and that the function of comedy is that of social correction. There are some grounds for this inference. The practice of the Greeks in the use of types and type-names,—names like *Phidippides*, *Dicæopolis*, *Mania* of the *Aristophanic* comedy, or *Glycerium*, *Palaestra*, *Bombomachides* of the *Plautan* comedy, the *Voltores* and *Corbaccios*, the *La Fooles* and *Moroses*, the *Mammons*, *Subtles*, *Faces* of *Jonson*, the similar practice of his successors far into the eighteenth century, attest that dramatists seemed to be dramatizing moral qualities and types rather than persons. The very titles of the comedies: "*Wasps*," "*Birds*," "*Volpone*," "*Epicoene*," "*L'Avare*," "*Les Precieuses*" bespeak traits rather than persons. But moral tragedies like "*Everyman*" and "*Ghosts*" are no less typically and abstractly named; and there is scarcely a tragic character that cannot, as properly as any protagonist of comedy, be labelled by the peculiar trait which constitutes his tragic nature. In point of fact, comedy has no monopoly over these forms of art in the chastisement of the anti-social. And what, moreover, is anti-social? A convention, a mode or habit which has attained universality is as often the object of laughter as an isolated individual, a group as often as a habit. And these are as frequently condemned by tragedy as by comedy. Satire and irony, indeed, are correctives. But the corrective principle of these is not their comic quality, but their tragic earnestness. Satire is a battle, not a joke; comedy turns the battle into a joke. Where comedy becomes corrective it is no longer truly comic. For the subject of a joke there can be no sting if he is to laugh; and if it stings he cannot laugh. The laughter can have no portion in the ruin which moves him to mirth.

That it is a ruin which moves to mirth, and that the merry man must have no share in it, is most patent in the comic of

words. Civilized comedy is at its highest in words. These alone can render the very refinements of mal-adjustment, the delicate disharmonies of the spirit. They reveal the range of battle between mind and mind as nothing else can. Yet what target of a poisoned verbal dart ever responded to the impact with laughter or admired the accuracy of the aim or the sharpness of the missile? Invariably his first action is the aggression or withdrawal of defence. A return shot, scornful silence,—but no broadside of laughter. The play of wit has always imminent over it the play of the sword. The quip becomes the stab with a turn of the hand, and this just because the object of witty play is a ruin, or like to be one in that play. Recall by way of example that superb witticism of Heine's at a certain Parisian *salon*, where he, Soulié and an enormously wealthy *parvenu* were guests. The *parvenu* naturally received more attention than the two men of letters,—which moved Soulié to remark: "Even in the nineteenth century, they still worship the golden calf." "Yes," assented Heine, "but this one is much older." This characteristic Heinesque remark makes of its subject an ox; and 'ox' is the German *Schimpfwort* for stupidity, dullness, maladroitness. To call a man an ox is to insult and to degrade him; it is, by a stretch of meaning, to ruin his reputation for intelligence, to destroy his human dignity, and to make him like the beasts of the field. This Heine has done. Moreover, he has not done it by a direct aggression. He has ostensibly referred only to the age of the *parvenu*; he has ostensibly even defended him against attack. He has said nothing overtly insulting, yet he has called the man a calf of advanced years. In the phrase, "much older," therefore, there are two ideas not compatible, not belonging together, titillating the attention of the auditor. And this enhances the excellence of the witticism. Of wit which is impersonal, which is the play of ideas as such, and has no moral lilt against another person, the essence is this unstable union of thoughts, this conflict, incongruity, crush, and interference of two or more ideas, struggling for place in one word. The pun is, of course, the most obvious example of this fact; but it may be brought about in many ways,—by a slight difference in emphasis, metonymy, inversion, metaphor. Invariably there is an ambiguity between denotation and connotation, between figurative and literal meaning, which is the soul of the *double entendre*, as well as of the bald disharmony of ideas or of objects. Much of its quality is evident in the reply of one soldier to another who had called his attention to the bold escape and the immediate pursuit of a spy. "He is running for dear life" said the one, and the other replied "He'll

never buy it at that rate." It will be seen here that the literal and the figurative intention are jammed together in a strange and not incongruous contact. The pleasure and the taste of it are due to the jam. Still more potent does this become where there is no relevance whatever between objects, as in the wide perversion of the Twainesque humor, or in the attempt of the Scotchman to make his friend understand the meaning of 'miracle.' Tam had tried hard to teach him, but with ill-success. Finally he resorted to parable. "Look ye," he said, "when ye see a coo sittin' doon, that's no' a mirrecl. When ye see a thistle standin' up, that's no' a mirrecl neither. An' it's no' mirrecl when ye hear the throstle whistlin' in the tree. But when ye see the coo sittin' on the thistle, and singin' like the throstle, that's a mirrecl mon, that's a mirrecl." The incongruities are here obvious. Their violent refusal to hang harmoniously together is the strength whereby they "move men merrily." A most subtle form of it is the famous " 'T was brillig . . . " in 'Through the Looking Glass.'

From the coarse and obvious comedy of the clown with his falls and tumbles, to subtle and recondite plays of wit the material of the laughable remains invariably a disharmony, a maladjustment ranging from the impact of bodies to the clash of souls. No less do the depth and scope of philosophy, where surely there should be little place for laughter, offer the great and eternal disharmony, a spectacle which, as poets have more than once sung, moves the gods merrily. But men are so moved no less than gods. The cosmic vision may stir the thinker to cosmic laughter. History offers us one strange and wonderful figure, isolate among his kind, whom tradition names "the laughing philosopher." Democritus of Abdera saw the great contrast between man's hopes and his condition, his conceit of himself, his belief in his own power, his headlong passion and pursuit of his petty ends as though they were the world's will and the world's purposes, as though his struggle were the cosmic joy and sorrow. But the cosmos is a void, and a hurly-burly of atoms. Against the volume of their inexorable tumult, man's cries are as utter silence; against the background of their fatal onward rush his willings and achievings, but the uncouth jerkings of the jumping-jack's limbs when the strings are pulled. Man is the ruined victim of his own illusions. His destiny is death because it is self-deception. Therefore Democritus laughed. Laughter, cheerfulness, *εὐθυμία*, is a restoration of the true proportions. It rests upon a recognition of the narrow limits and the eternal conditions of human well-being. It is a turning of destiny to scorn by accepting it, as one destroys the sting of rebuke and the violence of anger by offering them no



resistance. They are turned to derision because they are spent on a void, losing meaning and purpose. Thus the laughter of the sage is a double laughter. Its subject is the self-deception of man which combats the inexorable cosmos, but its subject is also the rage of the cosmos spent upon nothing at all. In both cases there is an inversion, a disintegrating disharmony, outside of which the sage stands, and the master of which he feels himself to be. He is upon the Lucretian rock, watching and enjoying the storm and the shipwreck below.

The range of the comic scene, we gather, is no less than the cosmos itself. The occasion of the laughter may be the compass of one small baby's toe, or the unbounded universe. It plays over the whole gamut of human relationship and cosmic disharmony. Nothing may escape it, from the attenuated malproportions of abstract mathematics to the terribly weighted deflections of the universe. But of laughter two things seem true. The first is the fact that it cannot endure. Custom kills comedy. What is habitual, what we are well-adapted to, what is for a long time a part of our own lives cannot move us merrily. To do so, it must exclude us, make us foreign to it. It must become something in which we no longer have a portion, and which for the time, has no portion in us. The traveller is likely to feel this most keenly; that is, if he is a laugher, rather than a creator of laughter. The creator of laughter, the professional humorist, can scarcely be a laugher. He is not a humorist because he sees the comedy in things, but because he twists things and distorts them so as to make them comical. He is invariably a preternaturally solemn person. Laughter must be free, but the cause of laughter is always bond. The maker of the laughable is the servant of his vocation; he cannot laugh and render service at the same time. The laugher is served, but serves not. Hence, then, the traveller who can laugh finds all things in a new country ludicrous at the beginning. Customs and modes, habits of life and manners, the very scenery move him to laughter. But as his stay is prolonged, the disharmonies seem to rub off; the articulation of life becomes smoother and less noisy. He himself has now become, to some degree, a part of the structure; speech, manners, dress,—his own have somehow become confluent with them, have set him at their centre, where he once was at the periphery. He can no longer laugh; nor can he understand his original laughter. This process is true no less of an oft-repeated game, a witticism, a relieved nervous tension or a philosophy. Familiarity breeds seriousness or indifference before it breeds contempt. The second characteristic of laughter is that it

enhances or preserves the laughter's implicit values, not always obviously or directly, but invariably. The outcome of the comic situation is an alterative outcome, not a destructive outcome. The disintegration which is the object of laughter leads to re-distribution, re-adjustment, harmony, not to real human loss. The upshot of any comedy shows a harmony attained by attrition and elimination of excrescences, by the reduction of the evil, by a restoration, even if only a momentary one, of things to their normal,—one may even say, to their normative,—relationships. The inversion of the natural order in which most comedy begins, proceeds in the course of the action, by the mere inertia of the comic disharmony, to right itself. Don Quixote is led by the effects of his madness to realize and see it truly. Harpagon is led by the operation of his avarice to comprehend its evil nature; Willoughby Patterne loses some of his self-love, Volpone passes from his dishonorable bandages to his more dishonorable chains. The new harmony may not be enduring, but it ends the comedy. And it is, of course, true that not always are the normal social standards re-asserted and the habitual conceptions of virtue victorious. In Epicene the punishment of Morose is to our modern sense perhaps harder than his deformity of spirit deserves; the enrichment of Sir Dauphine by a swindler's trick, our contemporary moral sense will hardly stomach. But, notoriously, nothing is so variable as the actual social standard of mankind from period to period. Whenever we look more closely at the post-comedial harmony, we find that the standards of the age to which the comedy belongs have been vindicated. The standards of all time have little to do with comedy. It is sufficient that any prized thing shall be preserved or enhanced, that any distortion or evil shall be destroyed or decreased, even if for the moment only, not alone in the drama but wherever the comic occurs in sculpture, in painting, in the events and routine of daily life. The hat-chaser must recover his hat if he is to remain merely a comic figure.

Considering all of these facts together, what do they yield as the æsthetic principle in comedy? What is there identical between the tickled toe of a suckling infant and the philosophy of a Democritus? Students of the comic have given this question widely varying answers. There has been perhaps as much confusion in the definition of the comic, as in the definition of the beautiful. Theories may be roughly divided into three classes, yielding a certain minimum of unanimity.

The first group of theories may be called "degradation theories." They conceive the object of laughter as reduced in worth; and the laughter as enhanced therein. As Hobbes

has it: "Laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the infirmities our own formerly. . . . (It) proceedeth from a sudden conception of some ability in himself that laugheth. Men laugh at the infirmities of others, by comparison of which their own abilities are set off and illustrated." Laughter here is self-enhancement at the cost of one's fellow. The self-enhancement is as important as the degradation of the other. Other writers, however, take only the degradation to be significant. So Bain finds the "occasion of the ludicrous" to be "the degradation of some person or interest possessing dignity, in circumstances that arouse no other strong emotion." The dignities, moreover, must not "command serious homage;" and Groos finds the comic object to be one in a topsy-turvy condition, and hence regarded with a feeling of superiority. But for all three the object of laughter has in some way been reduced from its high estate. Something of the same sort may have been in Spencer's mind when he wrote that laughter naturally comes when there is "a descending incongruity," a turning from great things to small, a degradation.

The theory of degradation fails, however, to square with the obvious fact that degradation is a matter of geography, inclination, breeding and incidental affection. As one man's meat is another man's poison, so what may seem degradation to one may be exaltation to another. The mental state of the laugher is hardly one which feels the sentiment implied in degradation. It does not seem, in most cases, to possess what the Germans call *Tendenz* or *Schadenfreude*. As comic sense it carries detachment and freedom rather than malicious intention. The correct envisagement of fact which the theory offers is more simply because more freely offered in those explanations of the comic whose key-word is "contrast." The "contrast" theories emphasize differently the elements contrasted, but their intent is the same throughout. One author finds the contrast to consist in the complete exposure of weakness through the presence of a superior power. Schopenhauer sees it as the "unexpected subsumption of an object under a conception which in other respects is different from it." Hence he infers that "the phenomenon of laughter always means the sudden apprehension of an incongruity between such a conception, and the real object thought under it, thus between the abstract and the concrete object of perception." Bergson finds it in the opposition of the suppleness of life with the stiffness of mechanism, the substitution of one for the other; Freud in the release of repressed and submerged—chiefly sexual—complexes. And there are many other ways

of specifying contrasts. But they are, it will be seen, no more than specifications; their common element is the "contrast."

The contrast theory of the comic defines the comic by considering its objective nature. Aristotle's description of it as "in the nature of a missing of the target" stands between this objective description and the more directly psychological theory of Kant and his followers. This theory might be called the theory of "disappointed expectation." "Laughter," writes Kant, "is an affection arising from a sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing. . . . A jest must be capable of deceiving for a moment. Hence when the illusion is dissipated, the mind turns back to try it once again, and thus through a rapidly alternating tension and relaxation, it is jerked back and put into a state of oscillation." The first of these Kantian suggestions is hardly more than paraphrased by Lipps for whom "the comic arises, if in place of something expected to be important and striking, something else comes up (of course under the assumption of the ideas we were expecting) which is of lesser significance." The other half of the Kantian description has been more popular. We might call it the "oscillation theory" although it is essentially a form of contrast. It has received the endorsement of Hecker and of Wundt, and has been attached by them to the term "contrast."

The variations in these fundamental notions are innumerable. Writers have found the comic to be only that which violates social usage, or only that which conflicts with established moral, intellectual or æsthetic standards. The net result of a review of all of these theories is that they are all true, and in so far as they deal with unrelated facts, all exclusive of one-another. They are *specifications* of comedy under special conditions and in various fields. They contain the essence of the comic; but they have not really isolated it. Our journey through the field of laughter has shown us that this essence may reside anywhere in the universe. It is not confined to human beings or to social norms, as certain authors believe; nor is it limited to the merely living. Its habitat is as wide as experience. It ranges from the tangent which so stirred the jocund Schopenhauer, to the universe which amused Democritus. As anything may be beautiful, so anything may be comic. It becomes comic, as all the comic objects which we have examined have shown us, and as the theories of the comic which we have considered obviously affirm, when somehow it is at a disadvantage, out of proportion, mal-adjusted. It becomes comic when it constitutes a disharmony. This disharmony is the basis of contrast, the cause of oscillation, of

disappointed expectation, the essence of degradation. But by the mere fact of being a disharmony the object is not yet comic. The daily life and the arts offer the mind an infinity of disharmonies which are either tragic or indifferent. Intrinsically, things are no more comic than they are beautiful. The comic, like the beautiful, is not a property which things possess, but a relation which they bear to the mind. We do not laugh at a thing because it is funny; it is funny because we laugh at it.

An examination of the nature of laughter itself will show us that which more specifically constitutes comedy. We have found laughter to be a wide-ranging action, corresponding to the active character of its object. But this action does not have the purposeful, rapt nature of other human activities. It seems to be a detached and free thing,—a thing which is leisurely and secure. Even when it ensues upon absorbing fear, upon the madness of anger, the anguish of passion, it seems to have this liberty and security, this leisure, as opposed to the precedent breathlessness and extreme intentness. It seems indeed often to be a cry of freedom, of relief, a roudade of triumph. When we seek the earliest semblance of an apprehension of the comic, we find it in the replete child, repeating the pleasurable act of sucking. Its normal expression in the smile requires the baring of the rending and cutting teeth, the assumption of an appearance which, when well-considered, bears a startling resemblance to an animal about to rend and devour its prey. In the hungry beast of the jungle, that has fought for its life in a double sense, and has triumphed in its struggle, may lie the ultimate parentage of laughter. The explosions of breath, the gurgitations, the throwing back of the head as if to swallow, the sprawling, expansive movements of the limbs,—those are actions that beasts still perform when they have their prey completely at their mercy. And this prey, up to the moment of possession, was a peer. The struggle to live matches not kind with kind, but every kind with all other kinds; its may be a contest of strength against swiftness, ear against eye, eye against nose. And the struggle invariably carries its essential hazard which makes even the weakling his enemy's peer. There is therefore the inevitable absorption and tension and breathlessness. In no matter how unequal a combat, there is even for the victor one moment of dread and menace, and there is the final triumph and relief in laughter. The primeval laughter is the triumphant beast, with its paw upon its defeated enemy, and its jaws set for the act of devouring. The first laughter is life's earliest cry of victory over the elemental world-wide enemy that wages the titanic battle with it. Laughter is perhaps a mutation

from feeding, and it serves the same result: it strengthens life by heightening its vitality. Its scope has expanded as the world has expanded. The laughter of man has all things for its object,—all things that may enthrall him or do him hurt, in whatever sense. It 'degrades' them, makes them man's proper food; it contrasts them with what they were; it destroys their power over him. He stands outside and beyond them; they cannot touch him. The object of laughter is ridiculous, not in so far as it is good, but in so far as it is dangerous. It is the frustrated menace in things, personal, social or cosmic,—that moves men merrily, when their power for evil is turned to emptiness. The novel, the dark, the cancerous in the life of the spirit and in the life of the body becomes ridiculous when we recognize that it is ineffectual. And conversely, to turn a thing to ridicule is to make it ineffectual, to throw it out of gear, to rob it of its place, to compel it to spend its energy in a vacuum. This is true degradation, and the laughter in it is not appreciation but malice. It is for this reason that even to so intelligent and sympathetic a student of the comedy as Bergson or Meredith, comedy seems to be a social corrective. But they fail to see that the comic force lies not in the correction, but in the joy of the corrector. There is always the possibility of a certain cruelty in comedy, an utter brutish joy in victory which is ethically more outrageous than the thing it destroys, until one remembers that what laughter consumes, laughter first finds evil.

This observation yields the key to the right definition of comedy. Beauty, it has been noted, is the relation between the mind and the environment when the two are adapted to each other harmoniously, perfectly and immediately. And the environment which beauty presents to the mind is good in itself, an intrinsic and direct excellence. Now the environment which comedy presents to the mind is primarily an evil, full of discord and unrest. This evil comes to us, however, not as our peer, but as our slave, bankrupt and stripped of its power to harm. And to it, as to the thing of beauty, we are adapted directly and instantly. Comedy, then, like beauty, is a relation, but it is a relation in which we are harmoniously and completely adapted to what is in itself a disharmony, a mal-adjustment. It is a relation which converts evil into goodness. It adapts us adequately to disharmony and mal-adjustment, snatching as it were, life's victory from the jaws of death itself.